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ABSTRACT

A study of the Scottish Wider Access Program (SWAP) surveyed 153 current access students in an initial interview and 131 in a follow-up interview; it also surveyed former access students who were in their first year of higher education (n=99 initially, n=76 follow-up). Students were interviewed by telephone near the beginning and the end of their courses. They were drawn from three broad categories of study: science and science-related courses; social science, humanities, and languages; and nursing courses. Findings indicated that both groups felt satisfied with their access courses, which they believed had prepared them well for higher education. Five aspects of SWAP courses were probed in detail: modules, assessment methods, teaching methods, tutor qualities, and study skills. Modules gave students confidence by taking a step-by-step approach, although students were concerned about fragmentation of knowledge and about some modules being too easy. Continuous assessment helped students learn and built confidence. Students reported a high degree of mismatch between teaching methods in SWAP and higher education courses. SWAP tutors were rated very highly by current and former students. Higher education tutors were less often described as knowledgeable, patient, and enthusiastic. Students were happiest finding their own study skills and overall strategy. Access students experienced problems of three main types: academic, personal, and financial. Over 43 percent of students in higher education reported academic difficulties. Among former SWAP students in higher education, there was a striking lack of knowledge about student support services. (YLB)

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THE SCOTTISH OFFICE
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No 17

Students' Views on SWAP (The Scottish Wider Access Programme)

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Students' Views on SWAP (The Scottish Wider Access Programme)

Pamela Munn, Margaret Johnstone and Kevin Lowden

The Scottish Council for Research in Education

The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) was set up by the Secretary of State for Scotland in 1988. It offers a radical and innovative approach to improving access to higher education and encouraging collaboration among institutions. SWAP has three main aims: to increase the participation in higher education by older students and those lacking traditional entry qualifications; to target traditionally under-represented groups in higher education (such as those from socially and economically deprived areas, ethnic minorities); and to encourage collaboration between institutions so that progression from further to higher education is made easier. In 1992 the Scottish Office Education Department asked the Scottish Council for Research in Education to investigate the views of students on access courses and former access students who had gone on to higher education.

Background

SWAP involves almost all FE and HE institutions.

How much to you know about your institution's SWAP arrangements?

How does SWAP work?

Almost all further education (FE) colleges and higher education (HE) institutions in Scotland are involved in SWAP, as are regional and island education authorities. They form three consortia, North of Scotland, South-East of Scotland and West of Scotland, whose members develop access courses and offer places in higher education for students successfully completing courses. The regional authorities provide bursaries for students attending full-time courses. Most courses are provided by FE colleges with syllabuses negotiated and/or agreed by curriculum committees in each consortium in the subject areas concerned.

SWAP initially had a vocational thrust and offered courses chiefly in science and technology. As the programme has developed, the range of subjects has diversified to include: science; engineering; mathematics; technology; art and design; building; business studies; social sciences; health care; hospitality management; teaching; and nursing.

Most access programmes are based on SCOTVEC National Certificate modules, with between 22 and 24 modules per course. Each module is a 40 hour unit of work with clearly specified learning outcomes. Assessment is criterion-referenced, in the sense that students are judged either to have attained the learning outcomes or not; modular assessments are not graded (any 'grading' is carried out on the basis of performance as a whole). Most courses use continuous assessment rather than end of course examinations.

Access courses aim to prepare students for HE.

How far should access courses aim to mirror HE methods?

Access courses have to prepare adult students for a diverse range of higher education courses: some using continuous assessment, others favouring end of term examination; some emphasising applied, practical knowledge, others valuing abstract theoretical knowledge. Students are also diverse. Many have few formal qualifications and may have been 'out of' education for some time. SWAP can be seen as a means of boosting self-confidence before entering HE.

Who takes part in SWAP?

In 1991–92, the third full year of SWAP course provision, there were almost 1600 students enrolled in access courses; nearly half were over 30 years of age; over 40% came from areas designated as deprived, about half of all students were women; and most students had some educational qualifications (typically some 'O' grades), although about four in 10 had no qualifications in English or mathematics. Most students were attracted to SWAP courses by the offer of a guaranteed place in HE and about two thirds also gave job-related reasons for joining access courses. In 1990–91, about 71% of students successfully completed their access course and 67% of these are known to have progressed to higher education (the destinations of about 200 students have still to be traced).

Access courses have been successful in attracting a wide range of students.

As demand for access grows, on what basis will students be selected?

Aims of the study

The research set out to answer the following questions:

- Do access students see their courses as a good preparation for higher education?
- Do they encounter problems and if so does this put them off progressing to HE?
- Do students' views of access courses and their experience of problems vary with the subject being studied?

Research methods

Two groups were surveyed in 1992: current access students and former access students who were in their first year of higher education in the academic session 1991–92. Students were interviewed twice by telephone — near the beginning and near the end of their courses — so that their initial impressions could be revised in the light of greater experience. The students were drawn

from three broad categories: science and science-related courses; social science, humanities and languages; and nursing courses. A total of 153 current access students was interviewed, about a 10% sample of all current access students, and 99 higher education students, a 20% sample of access students in their first year of higher education. Two points should be borne in mind: the samples were self-selected and therefore not fully representative of all access students; and some students were lost in the follow-up surveys.

Overall findings

As in all surveys, people can respond only to the questions they are asked and the results provide some paradoxes. Most students were satisfied with their access courses, which they believed had prepared them well for higher education. Yet many in their first year of HE were experiencing difficulties with the academic content of their courses. We know little about the nature and intensity of the difficulties from the survey and whether these inhibited progress into the second year of HE. Perhaps the students expected academic learning in HE to be difficult and blamed themselves rather than their access courses. Let us examine their views in more detail.

A good preparation for higher education?

Students were very satisfied with access courses.

How can good practice be sustained as demand for access grows?

By the end of their access year, 83% of students felt either very well, or quite well prepared, for higher education. By the end of their first year in HE, former access students felt similarly positive with 85% expressing satisfaction. These are gratifying figures for all involved in SWAP and particularly so for the tutors who teach access courses. The high level of satisfaction from students at the end of their first year in HE is noteworthy, based as it is on real experience of the demands of high level courses. This high level of satisfaction is borne out by other aspects of the survey. For instance, when asked in June whether their access course had been worthwhile, 98% of current access students said 'yes' and 91% said they were intending to progress to HE.

Five aspects of access courses were probed in detail: modules, assessment methods, teaching methods, tutor qualities and study skills. Did a positive picture emerge across all these areas?

Modules

Most students were positive about the SCOTVEC module system and said it helped build confidence and motivate them. The step-by-step approach was welcomed. However, as higher education drew nearer, the access students were less convinced about modules: 19% felt negative in March and 32% were negative in June. The same trend was apparent among those on HE courses: 24% were negative in March and this had risen to a worrying 43% by June. The most frequent criticisms of modules were to do with

fragmented learning. Students commented on forgetting a lot of what they were taught (44% of access students), not having an overall view of the subject (43%) and being unable to see the connection between one module and another (23%). Those with experience of HE voiced similar concerns and 42% added that the academic level of the subjects on their access courses was too low. Those on science courses were most critical of the modules; nursing students were least critical.

Some students criticised modules as fragmenting learning.

How can students be encouraged to consolidate their learning? Can projects and integrated modules help?

Such worries are not inevitable features of a modular curriculum. Modules can be integrated and delivered so that there is recapitulation and integration of old and new material. Furthermore, the worries about appropriate levels of modules can be quickly addressed through curriculum committees, where FE and HE tutors can revise the courses.

Assessment

Continuous assessment was generally welcomed by current access students. Over 70% of students agreed that it built up their confidence, made them want to learn and rewarded them for success. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students who had progressed to higher education were much more aware of and worried by examinations. At their first interview, almost two-thirds felt that assessment on their access courses had not prepared them for the kind of assessment they would meet in HE; just over three-quarters of them reported that their HE courses were more exam-based than their access course had been. However, at their second interview, with exams behind them, the students were more optimistic: this time half the group felt that access assessment had prepared them for HE. It is possible, of course, that this finding was not wholly representative as some HE students were not contactable at the second round of interviews. Those HE students who were positive about access assessment highlighted the boost it gave to confidence and motivation. This helped performance in more traditional exams.

Some access students would have welcomed exam practice.

What are the pros and cons of providing this?

> *'Continuous assessment gave you confidence in small areas. It encouraged you to achieve.'*

The more negative students were critical of the lack of exams or of exam practice rather than of continuous assessment itself. They felt that students entering HE with conventional qualifications such as Highers and 'A' levels were at an advantage.

Teaching methods

Students were asked which teaching methods were most commonly used on their courses and which were the most effective for them. Current access students listed a wide range of teaching methods used — mini-lecture, group discussion, problem solving and question and answer — and almost a quarter of the group could not say which was the most common method, thus emphasising the mixture of approaches used. The students also disagreed over

which method was least effective for them, although handouts seemed to be the least popular (12% of students). In stark contrast, 57% of students in higher education said the formal lecture was the most common teaching method; it was also the method judged least effective by 44%.

HE could be alienating for former access students.

What can HE institutions do to encourage students to feel part of a community?

Although there was quite a high degree of mismatch between teaching methods on access and HE courses, did this affect the students' ability to cope? Some students had anticipated differences in methods and indeed pointed out that access tutors *'tried to help us and let us know what to expect'*. For others, mass lectures, being left to your own devices and the lack of group solidarity in higher education were demotivating. As one student commented:

> *'[You were] nursed through access. [It's] totally different on this course; you're left to your own devices.'*

For access students, who may have been used to a high level of tutor contact, and group cohesion and support, the teaching methods used in HE may lead to feelings of alienation.

Qualities of tutors

Tutors on access courses were rated very highly by current and former students. They were perceived as knowledgeable, patient and enthusiastic. Their only failing was sometimes in rushing through material. HE tutors were also described as knowledgeable, patient and enthusiastic, but slightly less often than access tutors. The largest difference was in tutors' ability to communicate well; 76% of HE students saw this as a quality of access tutors, but only 44% saw it as a quality of HE tutors. This may reflect the lack of opportunity given to HE tutors, if teaching is largely by lecture.

Access students appreciated tutors' help, encouragement and patience.

Can access courses encourage more independent learning?

For the HE students looking back, the other major difference was in terms of 'helping students express their own views'; 92% mentioned this for HE tutors compared with 70% for access tutors. This may be the beneficial side of being 'left to get on with it' in HE but, with hindsight, several HE students criticised access methods as spoon feeding.

Study skills

Having effective study skills is integral to making progress in HE. Access courses can provide study skills either through free-standing modules or by integrating study skills into subject teaching. Topics covered include note-taking, essay writing, using the library and researching topics. Those who were positive about study skills were highly enthusiastic:

> *'Invaluable! Strategies, techniques in organising and preparing work to write essays. Knowledge of how to use resources gave an advantage over new young students coming straight from school.'*

Given the emphasis on exams elsewhere in the interviews, it was surprising that there was no concern about lack of exam practice.

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The largest group of complaints were of skills being *'too little, too late'* and there were also comments about study skills courses being patronising. *'It was taught as if we were five year olds!'*

No one complained that study skills teaching had misled or confused them. Some students felt that they were happier finding their own skills and their own overall strategy. This suggests that study skills should not be taught in a prescriptive way but that students should be offered opportunities to explore a range of approaches, with no one way presented as the best. Students generally welcomed hearing about how other students organised their work and went about the business of studying.

How successful was transfer to higher education?

Few access students progressed to HND or HNC courses.

Should such advanced courses feature more strongly as possibilities in SWAP literature?

Most students on access courses wanted to progress to higher education and in particular to degree level study. Few wanted HND or HNC courses. The attractions of the guaranteed place were strong and, for most of this sample, the only condition for entry to higher education was successful completion of the access course. A minority reported that in addition they had to achieve certain 'grades' in particular subjects and five had been asked to attend a university summer school. Some students resented these additional conditions, particularly when summer schools involved considerable extra expense.

Were there problems for students?

Students who had discontinued access courses reported a range and variety of problems that did not stand out from those of successful students. A study carried out for Edinburgh University's Centre for Continuing Education (Cullen 1992, unpublished) reports similar findings. Access students left courses for complex reasons and the report suggests that 'often the reason given at the time was only either the last straw or the least threatening reasons to reveal'.

Access students experienced problems of three main types: academic, personal and financial. Background information about the samples suggests that for a substantial number, progression to HE involved sacrifices. Because students were older (about half were aged over 30 years), they tended to have more financial and family commitments (over a third had dependent children). Almost half had been in full-time paid employment before starting their studies and most of those who had been employed had held their job for at least three years.

Students were more likely to seek and receive help with academic problems and with 'admissible' personal problems such as child care or illness. They were unlikely to seek help about marital problems or general relationship problems or to seek help with financial worries. Problems mentioned by 40% or more students are shown opposite.

All these problems were reported as adversely affecting students' work. Although the largest number of students experienced

Problems mentioned by 40% or more of students

	% of access students (n = 153)		% of ex-access students in HE (n = 99)
Inadequate grant	57	Inadequate grant	54
Forced to spend savings	49	Cost of course materials	52
Finding the time to study	42	Forced to spend savings	50
		Finding the time to study	50
		Being self-disciplined	49
		Difficulties with the subject	43
(Students could mention more than one problem)		Inaccessible learning materials	41

financial problems, it was personal problems that were more likely to affect students' work. It is noteworthy that the generally accepted problems of child care did not feature in the list. This may be an area where institutions are now more prepared and able to help students cope. Alternatively, having small children may be such a fundamental barrier to participation that child care provision is under-represented as a problem.

Students were relatively ill-informed about support services in HE.

Should HE do more to advertise these services to students?

Despite students' positive views of access courses, 43% reported experiencing academic difficulties in higher education. These findings are echoed in a small scale study for the South-East of Scotland Consortium (Mordaunt 1991, unpublished) in which more access students reported problems with volume of work and with all aspects of study than did other students.

Student awareness of support services

Most HE and FE institutions offer a range of student support services. Access students were much more aware of the support services that were available than were students in HE:

Students' awareness of support services	% of access students (n=153)	% of ex-access students in HE (n=99)
One-to-one meetings with a tutor or adviser about academic progress	95	59
One-to-one meetings with a tutor or adviser about personal problems	92	68
Financial advice from a tutor or other adviser	84	33
Careers advisory service	88	18
Personal and social development classes	76	32
Student self-help groups	73	35

(Students could mention more than one service)

The lack of knowledge of support services in HE is striking, reflecting poor advertising of services or perhaps students' belief that in HE you sank or swam by your own efforts. The lack of awareness of a careers service is particularly worrying, given the uncertainty about future careers of most access students.

Key issues for the future

Data from the first two years have shown that SWAP has been successful in attracting some of its target groups and in enabling a sizeable proportion of these students to progress to higher education. While it is too early to assess the full impact of the scheme, the study reported here has highlighted issues which will be important if the scheme is to continue to build on its successes:

- Students were generally satisfied with their access courses. Nevertheless, the criticisms of modules are a cause for concern.

  Can modular provision be responsive to concerns about the fragmentation of learning? How can SWAP facilitate the review and development of access course modules to ensure that they are at appropriately demanding levels?

- In contrast with the usual requirements of HE, access courses use criterion referencing and not grades to judge students' abilities. Some access students reported HE offers being conditional on achieving 'grades'.

  Will access courses be pressured into using grades for students and will HE offers of places then become conditional on certain grades being achieved as with ordinary students? How portable across the three consortia will access qualifications be?

- Students were much more aware of the student support services available on access courses than in HE.

  Can support services in HE be more pro-active? Can HE provide study skills support and be responsive to the needs of a new population of students?

Full report of the study

Students' Perceptions of Access Courses: A Survey, Project Report No. 43, can be obtained from the Scottish Council for Research in Education, 15 St John Street, Edinburgh EH8 8JR, price £5.00.

Acknowledgements

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Scottish Office Education Department who funded the study.

Notes

Arrangements for access courses

Similarities with HE

Selection of students

Good practice in access courses

Integration of modules

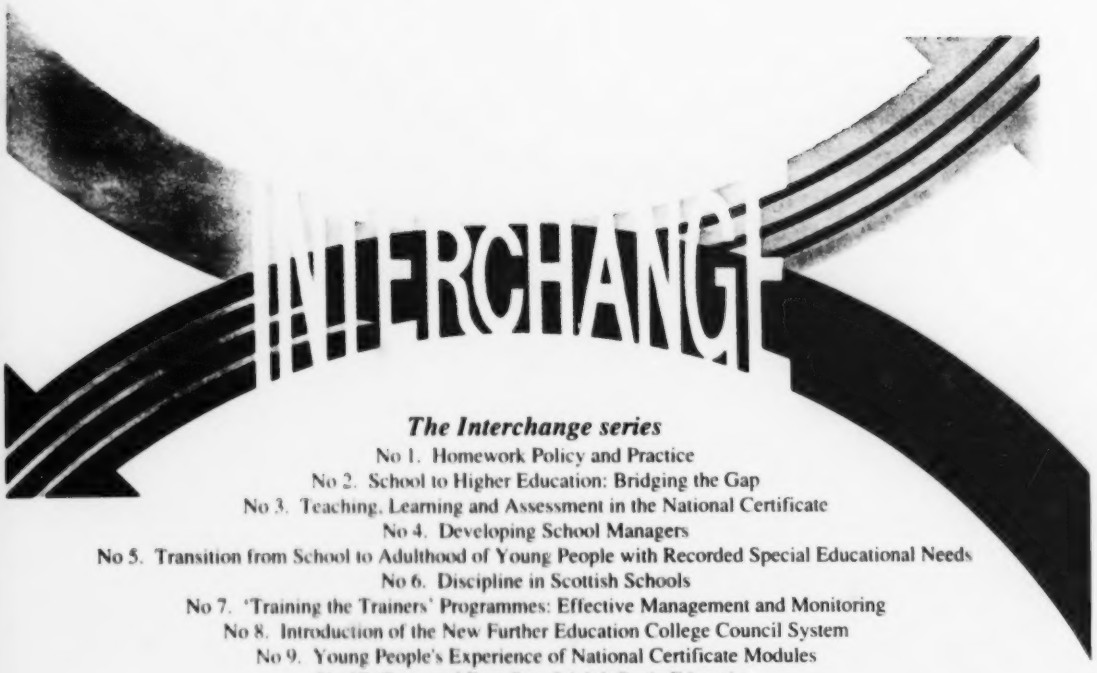
Exam practice

Group cohesion and support

Independent learning

Access to HND and HNC

Support services in HE



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